

Gay Christian Network provides safe harbor

Struggles make for a stronger community

by Lainey Millen :: lainey@goqnotes.com

In 2001, little did Justin Lee, a recent graduate from Wake Forest University and 23 at the time, realize what a monumental contribution he would make to LGBT Christians around the globe.

Born in Marietta, Ga., his family moved to Raleigh when he was four. He came from a

loving and supportive Southern Baptist family. When he was 19 he came out, but felt confused and tried to go straight. He had felt for years that gays should be straight and took a sojourn in the "ex-gay" movement, but felt it was alien to his upbringing. He shared that the "ex-gay" leaders' stand was that kids who came from overbearing parents were more inclined

to be gay or lesbian. This was totally not true for him. His were the complete opposite. He had tried to get answers from his church and friends. His background had been along the evangelical lines.

So, he abandoned this ship and set sail for other ports. He began to write on the internet about issues. He wanted to make sure that there was a place that was welcoming and provided a sense of community for gay and lesbian Christians and their allies. And, this grew into a worldwide attention-grabbing phenomenon.

From that seed, the Gay Christian Network (GCN) was born. Participants came from a wide range of people. Ministers wrote to him

asking questions for their own use and to support their clerical responsibilities.

A decade later, this religious support group is doing its part to help bring about change within Christian communities. They do this by bridge-building and changing mindsets about being gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-

gender Christians. With 18,000 members and growing, it works with individuals, faith communities, families, friends and the broader church to garner support for more acceptance. Over the years, it developed a documentary ("Through My Eyes"), YouTube videos, podcasts (which is coming back online soon through GCN Radio) and conferences targeted at providing a positive experience for

those who utilize these tools.

On Aug. 17, GCN, a non-profit ministry, celebrated its 10th anniversary.

Lee says that his work is vital to the health of people and church bodies. With the use of the documentary, he is working to get it out to every church across the country. It tells the story from those who have wrestled with the issues surrounding self discovery. He feels that working on the local church level will help them write inclusivity into their bylaws. This falls in line with GCN's mission, "Sharing Christ's light and love for all." They have a five-core component direction: Promoting spiritual growth; cultivating safe community; supporting family and friends; educating and

encouraging the church; and engaging the wider LGBT community and the world.

Staff includes Lee who serves as executive director, along with board of directors Bill Caldwell, Ling Lam, Mark Lawrence, Ryan Kuseski and Michael Zwiars. With the support of a director of operations, community manager and a plethora of volunteer team leaders, it covers the gamut of Christian communities worldwide. They abide by the group's statement of faith, which includes: "We believe that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians are full participants in God's kingdom, and that the ways of holiness and the ways of sinfulness are equally available to them as to others..."

GCN uses its website to disseminate information and serve as a point of contact for those who are seeking answers or support. They also are engaged in social media through Facebook and Twitter.

As far as the type of response they get from fellow Christians who are not gay and may not fully understand why inclusion is important for the church, Lee says that he hears that people think that they can't be gay and Christian, don't understand the issues, are frustrated over the level of dialogue that they have found, experienced antagonism in respective churches and want to learn more in open dialogue. Even parents are jumping into the fray and getting the support they have been searching for.

The organization reaches out to both potentially welcoming and unwelcoming faith institutions. They send representatives to conferences and work on coordinated efforts. They are constantly engaged in private conversations behind the scenes with unwelcoming groups to help bridge build. This year they received an Arcus Foundation grant so that they could go to 20 universities, mostly

in the Bible Belt, to provide training to create change in these communities. This will be their pilot program. Next year they hope to be able to go to Christian schools and hope to get funding to achieve this expansion.

They also set up at public events, such as NC Pride and Wild Goose, and work to network with affiliate groups. They have been in touch with Rev. Mel White over the years and want to do more with Faith in America. Currently, there are no projects on the table, but Lee says that there is mutual respect among all of them.

The website is the best place to gather information, Lee states. It includes daily Bible passages and Bible study, book recommendations, audio and video resources, message boards, calendar, a store and giving options.

Being headquartered in Raleigh makes sense for GCN, Lee says. He feels that since North Carolina is not as progressive as other states, it helps to keep them connected, grounded and aware of the work that needs to be done.

For more information, visit gaychristian.net and facebook.com/gaychristiannetwork. To keep up with dialogue follow GCN at twitter.gaychristiannetwork.

From Jan. 5-8, 2012, an annual conference will be held DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando at SeaWorld in Orlando, Fla. Last year over 400 attended. Speakers include blogger Misty Irons, former ex-gay organization founder Jeremy Marks and Lee. Until Sept. 30, cost is \$115, \$135 until Dec. 3 and \$160 onsite. Scholarships are available by request only. Family and friends may also attend at \$35 each.

Somber memorials

Tenth anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks approaches

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As Sept. 11 approaches, the nation prepares to hold remembrances and memorials for those lost during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks 10 years ago. For those too young to remember Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy or King assassinations and other tragic dates now seared into national memory, the attacks a decade ago have served as watershed life- and culture-defining moments for an entire generation. Above and beyond those killed that day, thousands of young men and women have ventured into Afghanistan and Iraq never to return home. Nearly every person in the nation has been touched by 9/11; many lost friends that day and others have lost siblings, children, friends or parents to the battlefield.

For the LGBT community, in particular, the decennial anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks gives us pause to reflect on those of our own who died that day. We also reflect on those LGBT servicemembers who served and died in the line of duty, fighting bravely for a nation that refused to give them full rights of citizenship.

In the days and weeks following the attacks, LGBT media and organizations began reporting on LGBT victims. Among the most high profile were a Catholic priest, Father Mychal Judge, and Mark Bingham, who helped to thwart United Airlines Flight 93's hijackers.

Judge, 68, was a chaplain with the New York Fire Department

Through the 1980s, he worked to comfort AIDS victims and presided over many funerals. He was also an ardent support of Dignity, an LGBT Catholic organization. On Sept. 11, 2001, Judge died while ministering to injured firemen at the World Trade Center. His memory lives on in the *Mychal Judge Act*, signed by President George W. Bush in 2002, which granted federal money to survivors of 9/11 victims, including same-sex partners.

Bingham, 31, was a public relations executive. On Sept. 11, 2001, he was a passenger on United Airlines Flight 93 and aided in stopping hijackers from taking over the plane. The flight ended tragically in Shanksville, Penn. A resident of San Francisco, he played on the city's Fog Rugby Football Club team. In 2002, the club founded the Bingham Cup in honor of 9/11 hero. The cup is a biennial, international, gay rugby tournament.

Judge and Bingham have certainly been among the most well-known gay 9/11 victims, but there are others.

David Charlebois, a member of the National Gay Pilots Association according to the *Washington Blade*, was the co-pilot of American Airlines Flight 77. Charlebois' plane was flown into the Pentagon.

A gay couple, Ronald Gamboa, 33, and Dan Brandhorst, 42, and their three-year-old son, David, were also among the victims. The couple and son were passengers on United Airlines Flight 175 heading from Boston to their home in Los Angeles.

Fifty-one-year old Shelia Hein, an employee at the U.S. Army's management and budget office was killed when the Pentagon was attacked. Her partner, Peggy Neff, was among the first same-sex partners of 9/11 victims to be recognized by the government and receive survivor benefits, after being refused recognition as anything other than "friends" by Virginia's Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund, according to 365gay.com.

These victims were just a handful of dozens of gay and lesbian people killed on Sept. 11, 2001. Many of our LGBT brothers and sisters who died 10 years ago or those who have died in service since then will likely remain unknown to all but their closest friends and family members. Regardless, their memory lives on collectively as each of remember that day and its events in our own individual and unique ways.

Our nation has faced many challenges in our history; without doubt, we'll continue to face more. As we do, however, we move closer and closer to a society that values, respects and includes — legally, civically, socially, culturally and religiously — each of its members, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. In that, we are the victors; radical terrorists attempted to destroy us from the inside out, but we have proven that even in the face of tragedy, America's values and ideals live on to prove that our "great experiment" can continue to produce good results. ::